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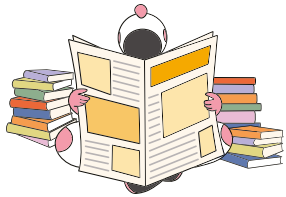
The Continent

Tigray on the edge

PHOTO: EDUARDO SOTERAS/AFP

COVER: Tigray, where fighting displaced more than two million people between 2020 and 2022, appears to be on the brink of renewed war. Central to this unrest is the unresolved status of western Tigray, largely controlled by Amhara militias who seized the disputed territory while fighting alongside federal forces. They have since rebelled against Addis Ababa, blocking return of territory to the Tigray administration, which now seems unprepared to accept any further stretch of this impasse. Outside these corridors of power, Tigrayans are stuck in the destitution the war caused, while bracing for a potential new one. Some attempt dangerous migration via Libya, only to be preyed upon by traffickers. (p17)

Inside



READING IS RESISTANCE

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THE WEEK IN BRIEF

PHOTO: ROD LAMKEY JR/AP

Red-faced: *US ambassador Leo Brent Bozell III apologised for disrespecting SA's courts.*

SOUTH AFRICA

Trump's pitbull in the doghouse

South Africa has formally rebuked United States ambassador Leo Brent Bozell III for publicly claiming that South African laws that set minimums for including black people in business and work are like apartheid policies. Bozell has expressed regret for also saying he didn't care about a SA court ruling that the song "Kill the Boer" does not constitute hate speech. Given his ultraconservative track record, Bozell's appointment itself signalled the Trump administration's antagonism towards South Africa.

DRC

Gertler hit with fine in mining corruption probe

A company linked to Israeli billionaire Dan Gertler has paid a €25.8-million ($30-million) fine to settle a Dutch investigation into mining deals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. His company, Fleurette, was implicated in a scheme to bribe Congolese officials to secure copper and cobalt mining rights at below-market prices. Swiss mining-conglomerate Glencore acted as Gertler's business partner in the Congo and is paying a separate fine to settle another graft investigation in Switzerland, *AFP* reports.

NAMIBIA

Hydrogen plans threaten fragile ecosystems

Namibia plans to build a major green-hydrogen facility in a largely untouched desert and coastal region. The project has raised hopes for jobs but also concern for fragile ecosystems in Tsau Khaeb National Park. Hyphen, a joint venture led by Germany-based Enertrag, says the project entails "world-class" large-scale harvesting of Namibia's solar and wind resources. Conservationists warn it could threaten rare plants and endangered wildlife.

MAURITIUS/CHAGOS

UK court throws out 'Belongers' case

A London court has dismissed a case challenging the United Kingdom's agreement to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, *Reuters* reports. A group of Chagossians argued the UK failed to adequately consult them about the deal. According to the judge, this repeats arguments that UK courts previously rejected. The litigants include Misley Mandarin and his father, whose efforts to resettle the Chagos islands were reported in Issue 231 of *The Continent*. Britain will retain a 99-year lease on Diego Garcia island, which hosts a major US military base.

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Sentenced to life, but where is Jean-Guy?

A former president of the Republic of the Congo's football federation has been sentenced to life in prison after a court in Brazzaville convicted him of embezzling $1.1-million in funding from Fifa. Jean-Guy Blaise Mayolas was found guilty of money laundering, forgery, and misappropriation of funds. He was tried in absentia – his whereabouts are currently unknown. Prosecutors said the funds included a $500,000 grant for women's football, but the promised competitions and infrastructure projects were never implemented.

KENYA

‘Biopirate’ nabbed with ants in his trunks

Kenyan authorities have arrested a Chinese national at Nairobi’s Jomo Kenyatta International Airport after discovering more than 2,200 live garden ants in his luggage. Zhang Kequn was detained on Tuesday while attempting to leave the country, according to court filings seen by *Reuters*. Last year, four men were fined $7,700 each for attempting to traffic thousands of ants from Kenya. Experts say the cases reflect a shift in biopiracy from high-profile wildlife trophies such as elephant ivory to smaller species that attract collectors.

AVIATION

Oil prices up, flight schedules down

Several African airlines are already reporting losses due to flight cancellations and higher operating expenses triggered by the war in Iran. Ethiopian Airlines, the continent’s largest carrier, said it lost $137-million in just one week, *Business Insider* reported. The state-owned airline has suspended flights to 10 destinations across the region this month. Other African carriers, including Kenya Airways, Air Tanzania, and RwandAir, face similar operational challenges, including rising aviation fuel prices as global oil costs increase.

PHOTO: ZANELE MUHOLI

PHOTOGRAPHY

Zanele Muholi clinches top photo award

South Africa’s Zanele Muholi has won the 2026 Hasselblad Award, which is widely regarded as the world’s most prestigious photography prize. The Hasselblad Foundation described Muholi as “one of the most influential contemporary photographers, with an impact that reaches far beyond the art world”. Muholi’s work celebrates Black queer communities while challenging discrimination and their historical erasure. They have also been involved in building platforms for queer and visual activist communities, *FAD Magazine* reports.

GHANA

Bid to recognise slavery as ‘the gravest crime’

Ghana plans to propose a United Nations resolution that would recognise transatlantic slavery as “the gravest crime in the history of humankind” and call for reparations, *Reuters* reports. Ghana’s move is the latest step in Africa’s efforts to seek accountability for historical injustices by former colonial powers. Last year, the African Union set out to create a unified vision on what reparations might look like, from financial compensation and formal apologies to policy changes.

MADAGASCAR

Cabinet dismissed in one fell swoop

Madagascar’s military ruler Michael Randrianirina has dismissed his entire cabinet, the *BBC* reports. “The government has ceased its functions”, his office said, adding that Randrianirina will appoint a new prime minister “in line with the provisions stipulated by the constitution”. No reason was given. Randrianirina seized power in October from Andry Rajoelina, after weeks of youth-led protests on the island. Rajoelina had been elected president for a third term in a disputed poll in 2023.

UGANDA

Kiplimo back on top in the half-marathon

Ugandan Jacob Kiplimo regained the half-marathon world record in Lisbon this week, after completing the course in 57 minutes and 20 seconds, *The Guardian* reports. Kenya’s Nicholas Kipkorir and Gilbert Kiprotich finished second and third respectively. Kiplimo last held the record in 2021 when he set it on the same course in Lisbon. He lost it three years later to Ethiopia’s Yomif Kejelcha at a race in Valencia, Spain. Kiplimo is a 10,000m Olympic bronze medalist, came second in the 2025 London Marathon, and won last year’s Chicago Marathon.

PHOTO: MARATONA CLUBE DE PORTUGAL

Nailed it: *Jacob Kiplimo bags the world record in the half marathon in Lisbon on 8 March.*

NEWS

SOMALIA

Oil be damned: The tuk-tuk stops here

Mogadishu's bajaj drivers survive on the thinnest of margins. The Iran war is demolishing those margins.

HUSSEIN MOHAMED IN MOGADISHU

DOZENS OF bajaj drivers in Mogadishu took to the streets on Wednesday to protest rising petrol prices. Demonstrators blocked major roads, disrupting transport and businesses. One litre of petrol now costs about $1.50 in Mogadishu, up from about $0.65 a week ago. In some areas it is even higher.

The price inflation is driven by the war started by the United States and Israel in Iran. It has disrupted global shipping, particularly in the Iran-adjacent Strait of Hormuz through which about 20% of the world's oil shipments pass. Tanker traffic through the route has reportedly dropped by as much as 90% since the bombings began a fortnight ago.

In Mogadishu, the fuel price shock has hit tuk-tuk drivers particularly hard. The three-wheeled bajaj, or tuk-tuk, is one of the city's most common forms of transport, with at least 20,000 of them operating across the capital. Some drivers have had to ground their tuk-tuks altogether.

"I cannot buy the petrol at that price and support my family at the same time," Ahmed Mohamed told *The Continent*. The tuk-tuk driver typically works from sunrise to sunset to support his widowed mother and three siblings. "We survived the civil war and terror attacks, but now we are in the middle of a war that we did not create."

> **"Now we are in the middle of a war that we did not create."**

Sa'diya Moalim Ali, another tuk-tuk driver, hoped that Somalia's government would do something to shield the local market. "The Somali federal government must respond to our concerns. We cannot become a victim of actions committed by others," she said.

Global oil prices briefly rose to more than $100 a barrel on Monday before dropping to about $83 after the International Energy Agency released 400-million barrels from reserves to offset disruptions from the Iran war.

After further attacks in the Strait of Hormuz, it is back above $100. ■

CONGO-BRAZZAVILLE

Election's in the bag, so the real question is: Who's next?

After Sunday, the race to see who takes Sassou Nguesso's place will kick off in earnest.

BERDY PAMBOU IN BRAZZAVILLE

THE REPUBLIC of the Congo votes on Sunday in a presidential election whose outcome appears largely predetermined.

President Denis Sassou Nguesso, 82, is seeking what he says will be his final term. He has dominated Brazzaville politics for decades and all that stands between him and winning the presidency yet again are six minor opposition candidates.

Sassou Nguesso first took power in 1979 and has ruled almost continuously, save for a five-year period between 1992 and 1997. Today, several major opposition figures are in prison or otherwise politically constrained.

The poll is widely seen as less about immediate electoral competition and more about positioning a future successor. At his opening campaign rally on 28 February, Sassou Nguesso said his generation was "preparing the ground" for younger leaders to take over.

His son, Denis Christel Sassou Nguesso, who is currently minister for international co-operation, is seen as a likely successor. He has previously held roles connected to the country's crude oil production and marketing. Sassou Nguesso the Younger was elected to the National Assembly in 2012. Nonetheless, he does not appear to command the same authority as his father within the governing Congolese Labour Party. Analysts say his unpopularity could trigger a power struggle within the ruling elite.

Other likely heirs include security chief Jean-Dominique Okemba – the president's nephew – and powerful minister Jean-Jacques Bouya, his cousin.

The vote takes place amid significant economic strain. Despite oil wealth and state-backed infrastructure projects, many Congolese – particularly young people – face persistent unemployment and hardship. ■

PHOTO: GLODY MURHABAZI /AFP

FOOTBALL

WTH, Wafcon? Show some respect.

African women's football deserves better than this year's Africa Cup of Nations fiasco, as do its players and fans.

MICHELLE KATAMI

PHOTO: LIGHT ORIYE TAMUNOTONYE/AFP

Soarable: *Super Falcons' Rasheedat Ajibade holds up the Wafcon trophy at Abuja airport last year.*

LISEMWALO LIPO, kama halipo laja. This Kiswahili saying means: where there is rumour, there is truth.

For weeks, rumours circulated that Morocco might not host the Women's Africa Cup of Nations (Wafcon) set for 17 March to 3 April. South Africa expressed its willingness to be an alternative host, but the Confederation of African Football (CAF) remained silent.

Now, the rumour has proven true. CAF announced the postponement of the tournament just 12 days before the scheduled kick-off – "in light of certain unforeseen circumstances". It will now be played from 25 July to16 August.

Those "unforeseen circumstances" have not been explained and it remains unclear whether Morocco will remain as hosts, or if South Africa will step in.

The postponement did not come as a surprise. But it has dealt a huge blow to the 16 teams that were in the final stages of their training camps. Defending champs Super Falcons of Nigeria were in Cameroon, the Black Queens of Ghana were in Dubai, and Kenya's Harambee Starlets were in Côte d'Ivoire.

Women's football in Africa is growing steadily, against all odds, but the casualness with which CAF handled the 2026 Wafcon has many feeling disrespected.

"African women's football deserves better," said Super Falcons captain Rasheedat Ajibade. "It's actually embarrassing at this point," her compatriot Rinsola Babajide added.

The tournament will now kick off six days after the Fifa World Cup ends, but it will also have to compete for attention with the Commonwealth Games for about a week. ■

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EAST AFRICA

Massive media deal gives mogul the megaphone in East Africa

Newspapers of record in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda have been bought by a tycoon tied to Tanzania's ruling party.

PHOTO: NTV KENYA

Power move: *Tanzanian billionaire Rostam Azizi.*

CHRISTINE MUNGAI IN NAIROBI

THE NATION Media Group is widely regarded as one of the most important media houses in Africa. In its East African stronghold, its outlets set the news agenda from Dar es Salaam to Nairobi and Kampala. That space has been guaranteed by its majority shareholder for the last 66 years, the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development.

A sale has been rumoured for months, and this week the fund confirmed that Tanzanian billionaire Rostam Azizi would buy its 54% share of the group, worth 1.2-billion Kenyan shillings (about $9.5-million).

Azizi is a powerful political and business figure, with interests spanning mining, real estate, energy, telecommunications, and media. He has strong ties to Tanzania's governing party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM).

He has previously served as national treasurer and as a member of its central committee and politburo. Azizi was part of a powerful political network aligned with former president Jakaya Kikwete and remains close to the incumbent, President Samia Suluhu Hassan.

The acquisition gives Azizi significant influence over the board composition and strategic direction of the largest independent media house in East and Central Africa.

"It feels like the last nail in the coffin of one of the beacons of African journalism," political analyst Nanjala Nyabola told *The Continent*.

Churchill Otieno, president of the Africa Editors Forum, received the news with similar unease. "The question in

the sale of Nation Media Group is not simply who owns the newsroom, but whether the new custodians understand that media freedom is not a commodity to be traded. It is a public trust that underwrites democracy itself."

Chequered past

Azizi has never been criminally convicted, but his name has been connected to controversies involving the intersection between public contracts and political power.

Between 2006 and 2008, a parliamentary inquiry linked him to Richmond Development Company, at the centre of a scheme thought to have cost Tanzania an estimated $120-million.

The company was contracted to provide emergency electricity to Tanzania's national power utility, which it reportedly failed to deliver. It nonetheless pursued compensation after the contract was cancelled.

Kagoda Agricultural, a company linked to Azizi, was also implicated in a scandal in which tens of billions of Tanzanian shillings were embezzled from the Bank of Tanzania through dubious import and debt-settlement claims.

More recently, Taifa Gas, another company associated with Azizi, drew scrutiny for receiving about 827.9-million Kenyan shillings ($6.4-million) in tax exemptions for a liquefied natural gas plant on the Kenyan coast.

Residents of the area protested the project citing environmental concerns, which delayed regulatory approval. However, the plant was approved shortly after President William Ruto took office in 2022 and later launched with his backing.

Both the Aga Khan Fund and Azizi have publicly pledged to safeguard editorial independence. Nevertheless, analysts say that, by putting a major agenda-setting media platform under the control of one of CCM's biggest financiers and dealmakers, the sale could make Azizi an even more significant regional power broker.

It also puts him back in charge of three Tanzanian newspapers that he co-founded. *Mwananchi*, *The Citizen*, and *Mwanaspoti* were sold to the Nation Group in 2002.

In 2024, Tanzania banned their digital editions after publishing a cartoon that the country's media regulator said "threatened and was likely to affect and harm national unity and social peace".

Through his majority shareholding, Aziz is now in a position to exert more influence over their reporting too. ■

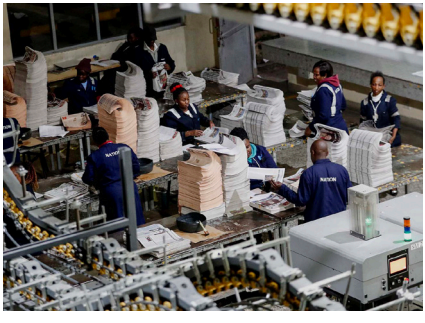


PHOTO: THOMAS MUKOYA/REUTERS

Hard-pressed: *Nation Media Group staff in Nairobi prepare newspapers for distribution.*

INVESTIGATION

Following in Bell Pottinger's footsteps

A manipulative digital campaign in South Africa helped to destroy a UK public relations firm. Eight years later, a Russian network linked to the Wagner Group tried that same playbook.

IN 2016, the now-defunct UK firm Bell Pottinger became infamous for amplifying one of South Africa's most polarising political narratives. Working for clients connected to the Gupta family – implicated in South Africa's massive "state capture" scandal – the firm pushed the phrase "white monopoly capital", spreading it through blogs, traditional media and networks of fake Twitter accounts.

The phrase itself was not invented by Bell Pottinger. And it resonated because it spoke to something real: the economic legacy of apartheid that still leaves South Africa among the most unequal countries in the world. But the campaign weaponised that anger to redirect public debate away from mounting questions about the relationship between then-president Jacob Zuma and billionaire brothers Atul, Ajay, and Rajesh Gupta.

When the operation was exposed, Bell Pottinger collapsed under the scandal. The episode became a cautionary tale about information manipulation in politics.

But not for propagandists linked to the Russian Wagner group.

Their own digital campaign, detailed in leaked documents reviewed by *The Continent* and an international consortium of investigators, began in 2024. This time, the effort was to bolster South Africa's governing African National Congress (ANC) ahead of a general election – or at least win influence with its leaders.

The evidence comes from more than 1,400 pages of documents leaked to *The Continent* – strategy papers, budgets, receipts, and internal reports. Journalists in Russia, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Latin America have been analysing the trove.

The limits of Influence

The 2024 election came at a precarious moment for South Africa's liberation party. Across southern Africa, liberation movements were losing the political loyalty once secured by their role in independence struggles. Voters were shifting toward present-day concerns – jobs, corruption, and public services.

According to the leaked files, Russian operatives carried out polling and interviews with South Africans before launching a multi-pronged strategy they called "Project Influence-8".

Their effort included several coordinated online campaigns targeting the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA). These campaigns carried provocative titles such as "DA-Racists", "Monkey Circus", "Corrupt DA Activists", and "Burnt DA Flag".

Their aim was to damage the DA's reputation through viral imagery and co-ordinated hashtags, including #DAMustFall.

Internally, the operatives claimed success. Reports said the #DAMustFall hashtag reached more than 1.5-million users, while #DumbAlliance supposedly reached more than two million.

Independent analysts are sceptical.

Murmur Intelligence, a social-listening data lab collaborating with *The Continent*, analysed several of the campaigns retrospectively. Its findings suggest the impact was far smaller than the internal reports claimed.

One example was the so-called "DA racists mug" campaign. It alleged that mugs bearing racist slogans had been ordered for a birthday party for DA leader John Steenhuisen. According to Murmur Intelligence, the campaign was activated by one of South Africa's biggest paid influencers but ultimately "had

RIP tide: *ANC supporters carrying a mock coffin reading "Vote ANC, DA is Dead" sing and dance at a stadium in Soweto ahead of the 2024 elections.*

PHOTO: MUJAHID SAFODIEN / AFP

little impact" and "was poorly spread". In total, analysts identified only 214 posts linked to the effort, and "network analysis shows that it did not tap into any larger conversations".

The other campaigns performed similarly. "The only notable expansion beyond the original influencer networks occurred during the #DAMustFall campaign when DA supporters engaged directly to dispute or counter the claims," Murmur Intelligence said in a report prepared for *The Continent*.

In the June 2024 election, the ANC's share of seats in parliament fell below 50% for the first time since the end of apartheid and it was forced to enter a governing coalition with the DA and other parties.

If the operation's influence was modest, the spending was not. The leaked documents show the Russian network reported operating costs of $42,000 in April 2024 and $40,300 in May. The funds covered housing and office rent, fuel, car rentals, travel, and other operational expenses. In May alone, more than $183,000 was budgeted for influence activities in South Africa – the network's largest single-country operation at the time.

Invoices hint at where the operation may have been based. One web-hosting bill lists an address at Khyber Court in Sandton, Johannesburg – an area often described as Africa's "richest square mile".

The DA raised questions about these Russian influence operations in South Africa's parliament last week, after being contacted by the consortium for comment.

Thandi Moraka, South Africa's deputy minister for international relations, dismissed reports on these operations as farcical, according to the DA.

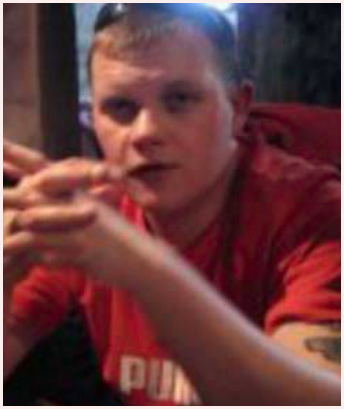
New friends in an old circle

Two operatives were reportedly responsible for the influence mission: Yulia Afanasyeva Berg and Maksim Yurevich Sokolov. An air ticket in the leaked files shows Berg, who has been under US sanctions since 2021, travelling from Moscow to Johannesburg via Dubai in March 2024.

"It's possible we met, but it had nothing to do to guide our campaign." – Mbalula

The documents suggest the operatives had contact with senior ANC figures, including secretary-general Fikile Mbalula. "During elections we meet with many people. It's possible we met, but it had nothing to do to guide our campaign," Mbalula told the consortium.

In late 2024, Sokolov – operating under the agent name "9477" – filed a confidential report describing an alleged meeting with Mbalula on 23 December "in a private room of the African Pride hotel restaurant". The memo, which *The Continent* has reviewed, was not in the leaked files. *Forbidden Stories,* a partner in the investigative consortium obtained it from a confidential source.



Ground ops: *Maksim Yurevich Sokolov, aka agent "9477", reportedly met with the ANC's Fikile Mbalula in late 2024, while the US-sanctioned Yulia Afanasyeva Berg visited South Africa earlier that year.*

PHOTO 1: SOFIA
PHOTO 2: STATE DUMA

It says Mbalula's then adviser, Bongani Mbindwane, known as Bongs, was present at the meeting.

In the report, Sokolov says he briefed Mbalula "on the results of the mission's work for 2024" and outlined plans for 2025, "which include sociological surveys and joint projects with the ANC party".

He claims Mbalula "thanked the mission for its help during the pre-election period ... especially for the independent sociological surveys." The memo also says Mbalula asked the Russian mission to "support the shooting of a film dedicated to the anniversary of the ANC party on 8 January 2025".

Mbindwane denied meeting Sokolov and said he was not in South Africa in 2024. In early 2025, a company he founded released *Legacy of Hope*, a 42-minute film highlighting Soviet and Cuban support for the ANC during the anti-apartheid struggle. Mbindwane is listed as one of its producers.

The Soviet Union's backing of the ANC included funding and training members of its armed wing, Umkhonto weSizwe, and offering education to activists in exile – ties that still shape perceptions today.

"The links between South Africa and the Soviet Union have created the erroneous notion among some ANC members that Russia is the Soviet Union," says political analyst William Gumede, founder of the Democracy Works Foundation. ■

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REPORT

In the shadow of the Tigray war, new sparks rekindle old fires

A BRUTAL two-year war in Tigray ended with a peace agreement signed in Pretoria in November 2022. But several key provisions were never implemented.

During the war, Tigray was effectively encircled by Ethiopian federal forces from the south, Amhara militias from the west, and Eritrean troops from the north. Together they imposed a months-long blockade that cut off food, medicine, and fuel, resulting in widespread famine and mass civilian suffering.

After, Amhara militias continued controlling parts of the western Tigray territory they seized in what Tigrayans describe as an ethnic-cleansing campaign that drove hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. Many former residents are still living in camps across Tigray and neighbouring regions, destitute and with little prospect of returning home.

Since the war ended, the alliance that fought Tigray has fractured. In 2023, an armed rebellion erupted in the Amhara region after the Ethiopian government attempted to disarm the Fano militias that had fought alongside it. Asmara-Addis Ababa relations broke after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed began speaking about Ethiopia's need for a port. Eritrea – whose independence ended Ethiopia's direct access to the Red Sea – interpreted

that as a territorial threat. Asmara has since been accused of supporting armed groups inside Ethiopia, including Fano.

Tigray's own leadership is now deeply divided. Its post-war administration under Getachew Reda was deposed by a faction of Tigray's army. Addis Ababa cannot easily transfer control of western Tigray while it is occupied by Amhara militias in conflict with the state. And some Tigrayan leaders have allied with Eritrea to wrest back control.

The unresolved situation in Western Tigray is likely to trigger new fighting.

Three journalists send pictures and dispatches from Tigray describing life as it is there now. ■

Dispatch from Mekelle

War is brewing again in Tigray. This time around, residents have become distrustful of each other, with some looking to make a quick buck rather than standing together.

Cross purposes: *A 52m-high steel crucifix overlooks the city of Mekelle in Tigray.* PHOTO: MICHELE SPATARI/AFP

ZEYWEGIH LEYTI IN MEKELLE

IN LATE January, tensions that had been building for months in Tigray erupted into confrontation.

Tigrayan fighters moved into the Tselemti district of northwestern Tigray, clashing with Ethiopian federal forces. Tselemti and other parts of western Tigray were ethnically cleansed by Amhara militias during the 2020-2022 war and remain under their occupation.

The following day, federal soldiers withdrew from Alamata in southern Tigray to the nearby Amhara town of Kobo and Tigray fighters took control. Two days later, the Ethiopian government suspended flights between Tigray and the rest of the country.

Although the suspension was temporary, its effects were immediate: Cash withdrawals were sharply restricted as residents rushed to buy and stockpile essential goods. Prices for food, medicine, and other necessities quickly rose. The atmosphere felt eerily similar to October and November 2020, the anxious weeks before the last war began.

At the small shop in front of my house, a long line formed as people tried to buy pasta and cooking oil. Many loudly complained about the sudden price increases. "Can you imagine cooking oil has increased from 1,650 birr to 2,250?" one angry woman said. "Macaroni from 150 to 175, pasta from 98 to 115, rice from 116 to 150." I had no answer for her. I bought two litres of water and left.

The fuel market in Tigray now feels absurd. Petrol stations have no fuel, yet it can be purchased just outside them at several times the official price, sold in plastic bottles. Months ago, the federal government stopped supplying fuel to the region, triggering this black market.

The day cash effectively disappeared from the banks, I met up with a school friend, Birhanu, who works for a local NGO. Over beer, we talked about our families, the previous conflict, the new escalation, and our uncertain future. A sign at the restaurant read: "Please co-operate with us by paying the bill in cash. Thank you." When staff refused my card payment, Birhanu offered to cover the bill – but only if I sent him 1,000 birr in digital cash on top of the 5,000 birr cost.

Words cannot describe how sad that left me. During the last war – in which I took up arms – we endured because of solidarity in our collective punishment. If someone found bread, it was shared. If a friend found a cigarette, we smoked it together. Now, as renewed war looms, war entrepreneurship is emerging instead. Some wealthy residents are hoarding cash and lending it at steep interest rates. Others stockpile food to sell later at far higher prices. For years, Tigray leaders here have repeated that our unity is our greatest strength. If that is true, we must be weaker now than ever.

The tensions have continued to fluctuate. At times, Tigrayan officials like Tadesse Werede, the president of the interim local administration, have tried to calm fears by saying they do not want another war. They say the clashes were meant only to pressure the federal government into negotiations. When the Ethiopian government allowed flights to Tigray to resume, it felt like tensions might ease. But the federal army continued to mobilise, moving tanks, artillery, and trucks filled with soldiers toward Tigray's borders.

Wealthy residents are hoarding cash and lending it at steep interest rates. Others stockpile food to sell later.

Mekelle was once known as Ethiopia's "northern star". Today it looks worn and scarred by war. Faded billboards line dusty streets, and conversations on the streets often turn to leaving – to Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, anywhere.

I left too. I moved to Addis Ababa, but soon returned after a journalist I know was arrested and authorities began questioning his friends. Many Mekelle residents are still considering moving to the capital, even though young Tigrayans there are reportedly being rounded up, as they were during the last war.

Walking through Mekelle now, my heart feels as empty as my city. ■

Go,

PHOTO ESSAY

Getting out is getting worse

ALL PHOTOS: MARCO SIMONCELLI

MARCO SIMONCELLI AND JANE CYBULSKI

INSIDE a small shelter in the Hitsats camp for displaced people in Ethiopia's Asgede district, Abeba Berhane pulls a few clothes from a drawer and gently folds them on the bed. They are the only belongings her daughter left behind.

Three years ago, her daughter said she was travelling to Addis Ababa to look for work. Instead, she moved north through Sudan toward Libya. Her goal was to reach Europe, earn money, and support her family back in Tigray.

Months passed without news. Then the traffickers called.

An aerial view of the IDP (internally displaced people) camp of Hitsats in Ethiopia's Tigray region, home to around 15,000 people displaced by the two-year war that ended in 2022.

"They would make us listen to her crying while they beat her," Berhane says.

The traffickers demanded 1.8-million birr ($11,500) for her release – money the family could not raise. She was detained for over a year and became ill in prison. She is now out, but stranded in Tripoli, still hoping to cross the Mediterranean.

A few shelters away, 46-year-old Gebremedhin tells a similar story. His son Jonas left more than two years ago. One day traffickers called demanding 1.5-million birr ($9,600) for his release.

The family managed to send 150,000 birr, but it was not enough. The traffickers continue to ask for more, sometimes sending videos of Jonas being tortured. Now the family walks through the camp and nearby villages carrying a large cardboard sign that reads: one million birr. Gebremedhin rarely leaves his phone behind, fearing he might miss a call.

Both families were displaced by the 2022 Tigray war, in which Ethiopian government forces, backed by Eritrean troops, fought Tigray regional forces. More than 15,000 Ethiopians now live in Hitsats, a camp originally built for Eritreans displaced by the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia.

Conditions in the camp are bleak, pushing many residents to consider migration. Acute food shortages have led to at least 50 deaths since July last year.

There are two main migration routes to leave Tigray: the Libya route, and the eastern corridor through

A young girl walks in front of a camel carrying goods inside the Hitsats camp, where displaced families live among makeshift shelters in a dry and exposed landscape.

Camp representatives sit inside their office at Hitsats. A large sheet of paper on the wall lists the number of displaced people currently living in the camp.

Djibouti and Somalia towards Saudi Arabia. According to the International Organization for Migration, 168,400 people took the eastern route between January and September 2025, with about 31% coming from Tigray.

The Sudan-Libya-Europe corridor is far less documented. There are no reliable figures on how many Ethiopians – or Tigrayans – have attempted the journey, been imprisoned by traffickers in Libya, or died at sea. Officials in Hitsats estimate that 3,000 to 4,000 people have left the camp for Sudan, Libya, Saudi Arabia and other destinations.

Pressure to leave extends beyond the camps, driven elsewhere in Tigray by fears of renewed conflict.

With key provisions of the agreement that ended the war unimplemented, Tigray peace is fragile. Following clashes in western and southern Tigray earlier this year, federal troops have reinforced their positions near the region's borders.

Suspended for a few days after clashes erupted, flights in and out of Mekelle have resumed and seats fill quickly. Buses leaving Tigray are often fully booked, too.

"I was born here. I want to build my life here," says Berhane, a municipal gardener in the Tigray capital, Mekelle. "But if something worse happens, I will leave."

Abeba Berhane leaves to collect water outside her shelter at Hitsats.

Three boys carry dried fish after catching them in a pond near Hitsats. With limited resources and few opportunities, fishing is one of the few sources of food and income for displaced families.

Gebremedhin sits in the courtyard outside his shelter in the Hitsats camp, holding the phone he uses to communicate with his son in Libya.

Three displaced women wait at a water tank in Tshehaye IDP camp in Shire, northern Ethiopia. Living conditions in the camp are harsh, with limited access to water and basic services.

Young men drink traditional coffee, bunna, while sitting idle in Mekelle. With limited job opportunities, many youths describe a growing sense of uncertainty about the future.

Women sell fruit and vegetables at a roadside market in Mekelle.

People queue outside a bank in Mekelle, northern Ethiopia, waiting to withdraw cash. Withdrawal limits allow only 2,000 birr (around $13) at a time, reflecting ongoing liquidity shortages.

Women walk past the Martyrs Memorial in Mekelle, northern Ethiopia – a monument to the region's past struggles, now set against a renewed climate of tension and uncertainty.

FEATURE

Hype vs health: How Africa became an AI testing ground

Some clinicians insist LLMs benefit them and their patients. But even AI advocates admit it is dehumanising healthcare.

CHARLES EBIKEME

HOSPITALS in Nairobi, Kenya, are welcoming new clinical assistants: artificial intelligence built on OpenAI's ChatGPT large language model (LLM). "We call it AI Consult," says Dr Sarah Kiptinness, a family physician and head of clinical quality and innovation at Penda Health, the hospital network that built the assistant.

Penda Health has deployed AI Consult across 15 medical centres, where it has been used by 106 clinicians during 39,849 patient visits. As a doctor enters clinical notes during a consultation, the AI pops up with an opinion on the diagnosis in real time. Green means it agrees and no further action is required, yellow means the AI has advice to offer,

In the bot seat: *Penda Health clinicians review patients' medical records on a system with AI support.*
PHOTO: WAITHERA KAMAU/PATH PHOTO

and red indicates it considers the clinician's diagnosis to need review. Kiptinness calls it "a safety net that is plugged into the hospital's electronic medical record" and "a consultant in the background who's just making sure that the clinical decision process is going as expected."

Tools to support clinical decision-making are nothing new. Electronic medical records often compare decisions against official guidelines. The difference here is the presence of generative AI – and the fact that its opinion appears in real time, during the doctor-patient interaction.

The team at Penda Health say clinicians who use AI Consult have a significant reduction in errors compared to clinicians who don't. Cases in which clinicians used the tool also show better medication prescriptions, improved patient education, and clearer follow-up plans. The team didn't find any cases in patient-safety reports where AI Consult advice actively caused harm.

They did, however, notice that the OpenAI LLM initially lacked sufficient context on Africa, having been trained largely on Western data sources. "When you see someone with a sexually transmitted infection in our setting, HIV is something you must screen for. The LLM would not pick it up (early on)," says Kiptinness. Kenya's ministry of health guidelines would have done so. Doctors also encountered problems with diagnoses related to malaria, meningitis, heart attack, and hypertensive emergencies.

To improve AI Consult – and, by extension, OpenAI's model – clinicians can "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" recommendations, providing real-time feedback. "I'd say it's mutually beneficial," says Kiptinness, adding that the model's data is becoming more localised and could benefit other hospitals in similar settings.

Like Penda Health, the global health NGO Path is experimenting with AI, starting with the least-trained people in its service networks: community health workers. "They provide a variable standard of care, in large part because of the variable quality of training they're given," says Bilal Mateen, who oversees AI experimentation at Path. The aim is for AI tools to build community health workers' skills while the health system focuses resources further upstream.

The aim is for AI tools to build community health workers' skills while the health system focuses resources further upstream.

For some workers, the appeal is straightforward. "It's making work easier," says Margaret Odera, a community health worker in Nairobi county. "We can train ourselves through AI. We can gain knowledge through AI."

Riding off experiments like these, OpenAI introduced a suite of "OpenAI for Healthcare" products in January. "Major AI labs have long viewed healthcare as a primary frontier for both

social impact and commercial growth," says Dr Ayomide Owoyemi, a Nigerian physician and clinical specialist. "It is often the first sector they prioritise to demonstrate the 'pro-social' utility of their models."

Putting the cart before the horse

Bill Gates, one of the largest private funders of global health, is already convinced of AI's "pro-social utility" and has emerged one of its most powerful evangelists in Africa. He's convinced that "even the most aggressive hiring and training efforts can't close" Africa's health worker gap. The Gates Foundation announced a partnership with OpenAI within two weeks of the company's healthcare launch.

Horizon1000 is a $50-million pilot scheme, starting in Rwanda, to "accelerate the adoption of AI tools across primary-care clinics, within communities, and in people's homes," Gates wrote on his blog.

The Gates Foundation gave more than $80-million in at least 154 AI-related grants across education, agriculture, and other sectors over the past decade. These include a $2.2-million investment to collect 9,000 hours of speech data across 18 African languages through grants to universities and public charity partners.

More broadly, Gates believes that AI could replace doctors – and teachers – over the next decade, by making rare expertise "free and commonplace", he said in a February 2025 interview.

There are risks in that level of AI enthusiasm. Hype – like Gates's – could divert money from health workers or deskill them, without fully reckoning with the practical obstacles to adopting the technology at scale. "We need a lot more research to understand the potential deskilling impact on health workers," Mateen says.

There's also the issue of infrastructure. "[You need] laptops across all medical centres. You need to make sure you have stable internet connectivity. The infrastructure for technology is where many of us are stuck," says Kiptinness.

She acknowledges that Penda Health is in a privileged position. As a private hospital chain, it can afford to experiment and innovate. In addition, its mostly young clinicians are already tech-savvy enough to adopt new technologies. That is rarely the case in the public sector.

Even where it is adopted, "AI is never really 100% the solution," says Muna Aden, head of health research at Nairobi county. Penda Health's AI Consult, she notes, depends on earlier investment in a proper medical-records system, which many public-health systems across Africa still lack.

Regulation is another missing piece in the Africa AI race.

Marketing in scholarly halls

On the other side of the continent, OpenAI is projecting itself as an investor in African artificial intelligence skills. The OpenAI Academy at the University of Lagos, the first of its kind on the continent, is billed as offering

Who's next? *Tech giants are partnering with African clinics to experiment with AI and patients' health.*
PHOTO: PATRICK MEINHARDT/AFP

free AI learning resources and capacity-building opportunities for students, researchers, and professionals.

"I see it as a positive step, particularly in its alignment with an academic institution," Owoyemi says. "However, my current concern is the scope: it appears to be a 'product-user' academy focused on implementation, rather than a deep partnership that involves local scholars in OpenAI's core research and development."

That critique applies to many other AI initiatives driven by an already-built product whose makers pursue research and service partnerships to demonstrate its usefulness.

Zammer Brey, deputy director for technology diffusion at the Gates Foundation, defends the organisation's enthusiasm as an efficiency imperative and a way to level the playing field.

"AI cannot be a tool that sits in the hands of six or seven individuals in the Global North. We must continue to train but we're not going to be able to train enough healthcare workers," he says. "So how can we help healthcare workers at the frontline make better decisions more efficiently?" asks Brey, echoing Gates.

Despite finding AI found useful in her own workplace, Kiptinness continues to advocate for putting human health workers first. In her view, the greatest risk is that healthcare becomes completely AI-driven "and we forget to prioritise human-centered approach". She sees the trust built in human interactions as a crucial part of the healing process.

OpenAI declined to be interviewed for this story. ■

This reporting was supported by a grant from the Tarbell Center for AI Journalism

TRAVEL

Marking time on a matatu to Taveta

Trade minor comfort for major connection on your visit to Kenya's Tsavo West National Park.

PAULINE ONGAJI IN NAIROBI

MOST tourists who visit Kenya's Tsavo West National Park travel by plane or tour bus. But getting there by public transport is worth considering. This demands surrendering your time, personal space, and even certainty, but the reward is an intimacy with Kenyan life that you can never get from 30,000 feet in the air.

Our 300km matatu ride from Nairobi began like many journeys to rural Kenya: before sunrise at the bus park downtown. Even before daylight, the park was busy. Women laid out trays of mandazi and boiled eggs and poured tea for travellers who would not eat again for hours.

Our 14-seater matatu to Taveta, a small town on the Kenya-Tanzania border in the foothills of the snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro, filled quickly. Most passengers appeared to be travelling for necessity rather than leisure: work, school, or perhaps to visit family.

As we pulled on to the cracked roads that lead out of that neglected part of the city, someone played gospel music through earphones that leaked sound into the aisle, a mother hushed her child, bags were wedged under seats, and shawls pulled tighter against the morning chill. The rituals of long-distance travel.

Along the A109 Nairobi-Mombasa highway, one of Kenya's main transport corridors, the city slowly thins out and Athi River's industrial sprawl gives way to open plains. About 120km in, somewhere near Emali, our driver stopped for a break and dozens of vendors surrounded the vehicle to sell roast maize and bananas.

Proximity bred camaraderie. A man spoke about relatives he was travelling to visit. Another pointed out dry river beds and rocky outcrops by name.

Proximity bred camaraderie. A man spoke about relatives he was travelling to visit. Another pointed out dry river beds and rocky outcrops by name.

Beyond Mtito Andei, casual wildlife appearances will let you know you are in Tsavo. Zebras stood in the distance and giraffes lingered near the road, unbothered. A few passengers leaned forward with their phones to take pictures, but most other faces were etched with weariness, not wonder.

Clockwise from left: *A street vendor sells snacks to passengers.*

A view of Tsavo and Mount Kilimanjaro in the background, Taita-Taveta, Kenya.

An elephant emerges from the bush near Maktau, pausing our journey without breaking its own stride.

PHOTO 1: MONICAH MWANGI
PHOTO 2: (LEFT) SERGIO PITAMITZ/GETTY IMAGES
PHOTO 3: PAULINE ONGAJI

We reached Voi in the early afternoon. Nearly half the passengers alighted here, meaning we had to wait for new travellers to board. I passed the time snacking on chili-spiced mango slices sold at the stop.

After Voi, the journey to Taveta takes nearly two hours. This leg feels different. It traverses Tsavo West National Park, the actual game reserve. The road feels narrower and the bushland and volcanic red soil seem to stretch on endlessly.

In Maktau, an elephant stepped onto the tarmac. The driver slowed down and cut the engine. No one spoke as the animal slowly crossed the road without acknowledging us, its breath audible in the stillness. At that moment, the road belonged not to vehicles or anyone's busy schedule, but to that elephant.

Maktau grew around the site of a British World War I garrison where more than 20,000 troops were stationed to fight the Germans across the border in what was then known as Tanganyika. The town's name is believed to be a corruption of the military command "mark time". And, that's what we were doing there: marking time, on the elephant's command.

Legs stiff, we arrived in Taveta just before sunset and I negotiated the final leg of my journey with an eager boda-boda rider. ■

DATA

A womb of her own

IT WAS International Women's Day last Sunday, but it's still fresh in our minds. So we want to know: Do Africans think women should be able to decide for themselves how many children to have and when to have them?

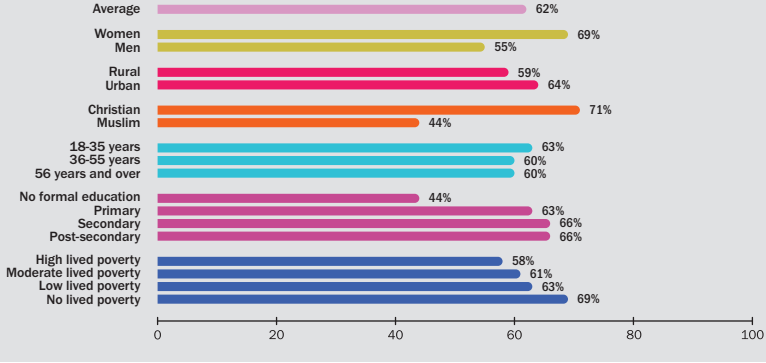
In short, yes. On average, across 38 countries surveyed in 2024/2025, a clear majority (62%) of Africans "agree" or "strongly agree" with this view. Unsurprisingly, women are far more supportive than men (69% vs 55%).

A little education goes a long way. Fewer than half (44%) of adults who lack formal schooling affirm women's reproductive autonomy, compared to 63% to 66% of Africans with primary education or more. Support climbs as economic status rises, from 58% among the very poor to 69% among the well-off.

Religion seems to play a major role. Christians (71%) are 27 percentage points more likely than Muslims (44%) to say women should be free to choose the timing and number of their children.

Youth (63%) are only slightly more supportive than older generations (60%), suggesting that without greater advocacy efforts public attitudes might not shift much in the near future. ■

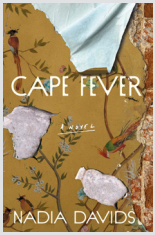
Support for women's autonomy in childbearing decisions | by demographic group | 38 African countries | 2024/2025



Source: Afrobarometer is a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.

TC BOOK REVIEW

BY JACQUELINE NYATHI



The Cape of Questionable Hope

In a house teeming with unequal power dynamics, the supernatural has a say.

OUTSIDE South Africa, the history of slavery in the Cape is perhaps not especially well-known. Fiction serves as a perfect vehicle for telling aspects of this story, as demonstrated in Nadia Davids' excellent novel *Cape Fever.*

Davids introduces us to protagonist Soraya, described by her mother as prone to daydreaming and telling fanciful tales. Because of her family's precarity, Soraya is sent into service – first, for a family called the Edenburgs, where something unspecified and unspeakable happens – and then for a solitary widow called Alice Hattingh.

Mrs Hattingh seems strange but this is explained, Soraya reasons, by her loneliness as she waits for her son, who fought in the Great War, to return home from Britain. But soon Soraya begins to think something more may be amiss. Things then begin to unravel rapidly when Mrs Hattingh takes an abnormal interest in Soraya's personal life.

This appropriately titled novel unfolds in a beautiful, haunting dream sequence as Soraya's dreaminess causes her to see a reality missed by more pragmatic characters. The subtext of the novel is what really chills, far more than any ghosts or the spectral wind that hurtles down the mountain, bringing endless dust. This is a novel about exploitation, about colonisation, about slavery, all of them linked in uncomfortable ways.

Soraya hails from Cape Town's Malay quarter, or Bo-Kaap, and evocative snapshots of this community's rhythms of life – family, community, and faith – are threaded through the novel.

In the end, we are delivered poetic and sweetly satisfying justice at the novel's climax. It comes as a great relief, more so for being so unexpected considering that the power dynamic skews so heavily against Soraya.

Davids has written a novel that is entertaining, suspenseful, and compelling – a rare treat. ■

The Quiz

1. How many presidents has Eritrea had?
2. Yamoussoukro is which country's capital city?
3. What is Uganda's currency called?
4. Yaoundé is Cameroon's largest city. True or false?
5. 'The Simbas' is the nickname for Kenya's men's national team of which sport?
6. Ranavalona III was the last royal to reign over which present-day island country?
7. Which country does the 15 August 1960 Bridge, or Pont du 15 Août 1960 (pictured), belong to?
8. Lomé is the capital city of which country?
9. Which mainland country has the longest coastline?
10. How many years* has Denis Sassou Nguesso been president? (*In total.)

HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

0-3

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7

"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

8-10

"Build a bridge and get over it – unless it's colonialism, in which case get over it, *then* build the bridge."

PHOTO: DESIREY MINKOH/AFRIKIMAGES/ UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP, GETTY IMAGES

Big Pic

Fast service: Baye Fall followers – unusual among Islamic communities in that they do not fast during Ramadan – drive past the Great Mosque of Touba in Senegal after delivering food to fellow (fasting) Muslims for Iftar.

PHOTO: PATRICK MEINHARDT/AFP

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